

"Henry's James"

Heather O'Donnell

In August of 1904, after more than two decades abroad, the sixty-year-old Henry James returned to the United States for a year. While William James had famously remarked that his brother was "a native of the James family" (W James 517), with little else in the way of national affiliation, Henry considered himself as American as ever after his twenty years in Europe. The book he wrote about his American journey was titled *The American Scene* only because James's first choice had been taken; he would have preferred to call it *The Return of the Native*.¹ But James's sense of himself as a native, as one at home in the United States, was shaken by his alienating experience of the American public, both as readers and as fellow citizens. Today I want to consider ways in which James struggled to preserve a secure sense of himself, the private identity he called "my me,"² in the midst of disorienting encounters with the American press and the American people -- encounters, I argue, that share a certain uncanny logic.

The American press staged a lively debate over the meaning of Henry James, in reviews of *The Golden Bowl* and of the early chapters of *The American Scene*, accounts of James's lecture appearances, cartoons of the elusive "Master," and parodies of his ornate late style. The name "Henry James" came to serve as a kind of shorthand for a complex nexus of anxieties about ethics, art, and nationhood. James's writing and life gave rise to debates about morality (was he decadent or just sophisticated?), manliness (was he effeminate or just sensitive?), and modernity (was he an aristocratic anachronism or was

he avant-garde?), all entangled with the question of James's supposed patriotism or lack of it. James himself experienced the press attention paid him as an assault, and felt a visceral sense of violation at the way that journalists used him to define their own positions in debates that often meant little to him. He felt like a freak, ogled for the benefit and entertainment of the American crowd: "only those can understand," he maintained, "who have been terrified & paralyzed absentees restored hither after long years & with every one wanting to see (or to deny) the strawberry marks on different parts of their persons." ³ His distinguishing marks were, he suggested, in the eye of the beholder, to be seen or denied at will, and as such did more to distinguish the onlookers than the absentee. "Henry James," equally serviceable as an accolade (the great artist) or an indictment (the great pretender), meant, in the end, whatever the American press wanted it to mean.

James was offered a number of opportunities to exercise some control over his representation, to address his American public directly, but he rebuffed almost every journalistic advance. One contemporary recounted the story of a reporter who tried to corner James in an impromptu interview:

Having formed the project of making a "feature" of this gentleman for a Sunday edition, the reporter had introduced himself to the novelist under a social guise and then had thrown off the mask. Mr. James, it appeared, objected to this not-unheard-of manoeuvre,

saying that he was more used to life in England, where a gentleman's privacy was not intruded upon. The interviewer, according to his own account, then proceeded to "talk to" Mr. James "like a Dutch uncle," plainly informing him that such an attitude was un-American; that in this country people wanted to know the jockey on the racer, the man behind the gun (I speak by the card), and that if they were so obliging as to buy and read your books it was only fair to humor their harmless inquisitiveness; that, moreover, it helped along your own affairs -- to put it crudely, it advertised you. (Dwight 168)

The reporter was rude, but he was right. If James were really to stage a major commercial comeback in the United States, he would have to advertise himself, and everywhere he went he met journalists who offered him what we would call "free publicity." To James, there was no such thing; personal publicity always exacted a price. As newspaper readers across the country entertained themselves with debates and cartoons inspired by him, James remained as aloof as he possibly could.

His aversion to publicity sprang from his insistence that the private lives of artists were, in every important respect, beside the point: a belief reflected in his attack on the cult of literary celebrity in his American lecture "The Lesson of Balzac." His reluctance to read his own press was also a result of his intense

shyness and sensitivity to ridicule; Edith Wharton recalled that "the effect of letting him know that any of his writings had been parodied" was "disastrous" (Wharton 189). He distrusted the press so thoroughly that he lifted his ban on interviews only twice during his ten-month American tour: once, when Florence Brooks of the *New York Herald Tribune* arrived unannounced on William James's New Hampshire doorstep, having travelled hundreds of miles with a letter of introduction from the Scribners in her hand; the second time, when he very grudgingly allowed Witter Bynner to reconstruct a publishable "interview" out of a prior conversation the young poet had had with James.

Bynner's request for permission to piece together from his notes a "more or less connected monologue" (Bynner 26) of Jamesian remarks prompted James into a more spontaneous outburst:

I have a constituted and systematic indisposition to 'having anything to do,' myself, personally, with anything in the nature of an interview, report, reverberation; that is to adopting, endorsing, or in any way otherwise taking to myself, anything that anyone may be presumed to have contrived to gouge, as it were, out of me. It has, for me, nothing to do with *me* -- *my* me at all; but only with the other person's equivalent for that mystery, whatever it may be; and thereby *his* little affair exclusively. ⁴

James's vision of himself as a "mystery," inaccessible to journalistic inquest, was in some sense his last romance; he located in his own

person those elusive qualities that "we never *can* directly know" (AM xvi), the condition of romance as he would define it in his preface to *The American*. While James experimented in his American letters and journals with different dramatic personae, trying "to make myself a notion of how, and where, and even *what*, I was" (HJL 4 331), in the end, Henry James refused to settle on a single identity in the United States. He left the question open to himself and closed to the American press.

James's careful distinction of "my me" from the public figure he resembled, his recoil from any "equivalent" of himself constituted or narrated by another, reflects what we might call the celebrity uncanny: the anxiety experienced by a subject when a media-created figment appears to represent (or reproduce) the private self. Freud defines the *unheimlich*, or uncanny, as the sensation produced when a person's sense of identity or integrity is threatened by a confrontation with something supposedly *other* which also exhibits, disturbingly, aspects of the self: "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 220). The classic example is Freud's description of encountering an intruder in his railway compartment only to discover that he is looking at himself reflected in a mirror. James would define this sensation as "the note . . . of the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy" (AD xxiv). His own uncanny encounters in the United States were not limited to the experience of the mass-produced images and versions of himself which followed him, as a literary celebrity, across the country. James's anxiety about his

public image was matched by an anxiety about the "public" itself: he experienced a number of uncanny encounters with other Americans -- or American others -- in whom he perceived a disturbing likeness to himself. I'd like to connect Henry's James, the "my me" he sought to protect from the glare of the media spotlight, to another cherished and embattled aspect of his identity: James's sense of himself as an American.

What if we posit an analogy between James's desire to protect his sense of himself as a person and his desire to protect his sense of himself as a "native"? I draw this analogy because I think that the model of the uncanny may be a particularly useful way to think about James's experience of national identity, because it does not assume -- as many readers of James's American writings do -- that a moment of identification with another necessarily produces feelings of sympathy or solidarity. Priscilla Wald has recently connected the uncanny anxiety described by Freud to the experience of national identity when she observes that "the uncanny sends us home to the discovery that 'home' is not what or where we think it is and that we, by extension, are not who or what we think we are" (Wald 7). James, a "native" who tried to come home, was no stranger to that experience, especially as it related to what he called the "germ of a 'public'" (AS 105) represented by the alien. Throughout his American journey, James had double-edged encounters with recent immigrants who made him feel like a "person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house" (AS 66). He experienced these encounters as

uncanny moments of recognition, both finding himself in the alien and recoiling from that identification.

The American Scene has long provided fodder for those seeking to dismiss James as an anti-Semitic, Anglo-Saxon snob: when he likens New York's Lower East Side to "some vast shallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of overdeveloped proboscis . . . bump together, forever, amid heaped spoils of the sea" (AS 100), it's hard not to gasp or at least grimace.⁵ And when James tells how he leaned over the spectators' balcony at Ellis Island to watch the arriving immigrants searched and sorted, he describes the sight of the huddled masses in terms of the Biblical fall itself:

I think indeed that the simplest account of the action of Ellis Island on the spirit of any sensitive citizen who may have happened to 'look in' is that he comes back from his visit not at all the same person that he went. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge, and the taste will be forever in his mouth. . . . I like to think of him, I positively have to think of him, as going about ever afterwards with a new look, for those who can see it, on his face, the outward sign of the new chill in his heart. (AS 66)

To know the immigrant, it would seem, is to know death itself.

But while James struggles with the "sense of dispossession" (AS 67) that these new Americans produce in him, he also sees something

of himself in the alien. His visit to Ellis Island unfolds as a primal scene, in which the repressed alien origin of James's own identity is shockingly revealed: "Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history?" (AS 95). James is honest enough to recognize that the difference between himself and the eastern and southern Europeans streaming through immigration is a matter of degree, not of kind: James's own grandfather had been off the boat from Ireland at the age of eighteen. Just as the aliens become Americans at Ellis Island, the American James discovers (or recovers) himself as an alien there: the absolute distance between spectators' balcony and immigrants' floor collapses. James is struck not merely by his difference from the crowd below, but by his similarity to them.

That similarity extends further: James the "native" very often feels like an alien in the modern United States. He shares the curiosity and bewilderment of the new immigrants, and he applauds the challenge that "the obstinate, the unconverted residuum" (AS 95) of the Old World poses to what he considers the homogeneous American -- or Americanized -- scene. James looks to the alien to bring certain "positive properties" (AS 98) to the life of the United States: the social graces of the Italians, for instance, and the historical consciousness of the Jews. On the Lower East Side of New York, James finds a quiet immigrant which impresses him more than any "gilded and guarded 'private room,'" because it reflects a genuine sense of taste and proportion, rather than a frantic expenditure of money; its owner and patrons create a sense of tranquillity with only "a few tables and

chairs, a few coffee-cups and boxes of dominoes" (AS 152). He pays the Bowery his highest compliment when he calls it one of "the real triumphs of art" (AS 152), and he is fascinated by the owner, who speaks only a few words of "the current American" (AS 152), and yet somehow manages to check the excesses of his adopted culture. James finds, in the alien, a reflection of himself as artist and cultural critic.

The complexity of James's response to the new Americans he encountered has been, over the past decade, more widely acknowledged. Critics such as Ross Posnock, Sara Blair, and Beverly Haviland have rightly called into question the caricature of James as a simple xenophobe, a genteel aesthete who surveyed modernity from the window of his ivory tower and shuddered with distaste. Certainly, James's efforts to learn more about the alien went far beyond what was socially expected of him; try to imagine his friend Henry Adams, or Edith Wharton, making a day of it at Ellis Island, or spending an evening in the Yiddish theaters and of the Lower East Side. (You can't, because they wouldn't.) James's identification with the immigrants is deep and real and complicated, and we've been lucky, in recent years, to have benefitted from such nuanced readings of that relationship. The reason I introduce the model of the uncanny, as a way of thinking about James's response to the alien, is that the uncanny forces the awareness that identification, in itself, does not inevitably produce a positive or progressive reaction. Sometimes, of course, we see ourselves in others and are sympathetically drawn to them as a result, but other times, we see ourselves in others and panic, shrinking and denying the

resemblance that unnerves us. It's possible to acknowledge James's identification with the alien, and the moments of genuine sympathy that identification produces, without concluding that every time James suggests or acknowledges some similarity between himself and the newest Americans he is expressing his solidarity with them.

If the critical pendulum has swung from *The American Scene* as xenophobic screed to *The American Scene* as trans-national brief, it may be time to for it to swing a bit back. I worry that in our haste to defend James, we sometimes ignore the tenor of his text; it's hard for me to see him luxuriating in "sensuous contingency" (Posnock 154) with the unwashed aliens, as Ross Posnock claims, and I don't think that the cumulative impact of James's zoological metaphors can be finessed away. I can't agree, for instance, with Beverly Haviland when she reads James's account of the Lower East Side tenements as an instance of his superior delicacy. James writes: "The very name of architecture perishes, for the fire-escapes look like abashed afterthoughts, staircases and communications forgotten in the construction; but the inhabitants lead, like the squirrels and monkeys, all the merrier life" (AS 102). Haviland suggests that the overcrowded conditions "may well have shocked James enough to have impelled him to try to depict this appalling situation in positive and playful terms rather than express his dismay" (Haviland 151), but, to my mind, the effect of calling the inhabitants "merry" and likening them to contented squirrels and monkeys is not to show sympathy for their plight and consideration for their feelings, but to stress a fundamental *difference* between them and people like James, who prefer their architecture finished, and live

inside it, protected from the public eye. Here, I think, we witness the recoil of Henry's James, "my me," the native, not only from the conditions of American publicity but from his uneasy identification with the American public itself.

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- 1"If Thomas Hardy hadn't long ago made that impossible I should simply give the whole series of papers the title of *The Return of the Native*." (*HJL* 4 328).
- 2 Letter to Witter Bynner, 24 December 1904. Houghton Library, Harvard University, BMS Am 1891.19: 14.

3 Letter to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 23 October 1904. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1094:795.

4 Letter to Witter Bynner, 24 December 1904. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1891.19: 14.

5 For twentieth-century readings of James as an isolated aesthete, see Van Wyck Brooks, Vernon Parrington, Granville Hicks, and most notoriously Maxwell Geismar, who describes James as a proto-Nazi in *Henry James and the Jacobites*.